

# I Got Shot Down

Seven airmen talk about the event none wants to experience.

*Air & Space Magazine*

*Phil Scott*

Vega Three-One. That was the mission and that was my call sign. It was the fourth night of the war—March 27, 1999. The only game in town was our wave of F-117s, striking targets in the northern half of “FRY”—the Former Republic of Yugoslavia.

I was single-ship, not talking and not squawking. I was post-strike in the most heavily defended area of Serbia, egressing the target area, high-subsonic and medium altitude, when I was hit by a surface-to-air missile. It was extremely violent. The jet was slammed into a left-rolling, negative-7-G tuck. Even though I was strapped in tight, my body was sliding out from underneath the lap belt and I was immobilized in the top of the shoulder straps, with my butt far out of the seat and my head and upper body forward, away from the seat back. My head [was] pinned down under the canopy.

It's about an 18-G kick in the butt when you pull those ejection handles; the preferred position is butt in the seat and your spine straight. I remember reaching for the ejection handles, and I remember thinking calmly, matter-of-factly, “You are in the worst possible position—if you even live through this you may have massive lumbar damage and a broken neck.” I remember every fragment of the search and rescue, but not actually reaching the ejection handles and pulling on them. There's no doubt in my mind I had some help with that....

It seemed like it took minutes for the entire ejection sequence, when actually it was 1.4 seconds from pulling the handles to hanging under a fully inflated parachute. The seat was tumbling violently and I was again so calm, extremely calm. So many things went through my mind. I remember imagining standing next to the Serbian SAM operator, having a conversation with him and saying, “Really nice shot, but you're not getting me.” Also, “Nuts!”—you know, in a light, humorous sort of way. And “I may not be able to call my daughter tomorrow on her birthday—isn't that an inconvenience?... Why am I still in the seat? Maybe I should pull the emergency release lever [which drops the seat and releases the parachute].” All of the sudden: Bam! The seat kicked me out. I was deployed and hanging onto the parachute. I looked up and my first reaction was “Yes, perfect canopy!” My second reaction was—still, in a light, humorous way—“You got to be kidding me—an orange and white paneled parachute, glowing like a Chinese lantern in the nearly-full-moon night!”

The descent I estimate at around eight minutes. I had a lot to do. It got very, very busy. I took inventory, got my survival equipment. I didn't think to check for injuries. I got out my survival radio and started making mayday calls. I had a basic survival radio—no over-the-horizon capability.

There were numerous airborne assets out there, yet I was not able to get good two-way com until Johnny on the Spot, "FRANK 36," a KC-135 refueling F-16s in Bosnia-Herzegovina, answered my calls. When I was satisfied I'd made good two-way com with a friendly, I tucked the radio away and got busy with other things.

The "hold-up" site I ended up choosing was in a shallow irrigation ditch separating two portions of a large, freshly plowed farm field. I was determined to deny the Serbians the significant exploitation and propaganda potential of having a captured F-117 pilot.

From pulling the handles to the time the helicopters pulled me out was just shy of eight hours. They took me to a base in Bosnia, loaded me on a C-130 to Aviano air base [in Italy]; then I was able to talk to my wife on a [secure] STU-III phone to ensure no compromise of anything related to the event, [including] my and my family's identities. It was a wonderful and emotional phone call, as you can imagine. My wife had been made aware of the situation. And after that I talked to my daughter and wished her happy birthday. She had just turned 10. We took off from North Field, Guam. It was a daylight mission over Nagoya, Japan, to bomb the Mitsubishi aircraft engine factory. We started our bomb run at 20,000 feet, which was the highest we ever flew before. We had just dropped our bombs when I heard over the intercom, "Fighters coming in at 12 o'clock level." A second or two later there was a brilliant flash—a Kawasaki Ki-45 suicide plane tore off our left wing with the number-one engine. We rolled over on our back and went into an inverted flat spin. I was 20 years old and I remember saying out loud, "Mom's going to give me hell for this." I was between the passageway and the right gun blister and I figured I was going to die, so I just relaxed and let myself go.

Somehow I went, bareheaded, through the Plexiglas blister—took the entire blister off with my head and took the gunsight off with my shoulder. The left gunner and the engineer got out, but I didn't see them get out. Nobody else made it out. I heard later from the engineer that the plane blew up before it hit the ground. The parachute was open when I came to. I must have pulled the ripcord unconsciously.

I got down. There could have been about 150 to 200 people—soldiers, police—coming after me. Then the fun started. The first one who got to me hit me with a bamboo pole and sent me rolling. A soldier hit me with a bayonet through my flying suit but missed my body. An officer made him stop and then some soldiers beat me up, broke my collar bone and three ribs. They handcuffed me in front and tied a rope around my arms in back and blindfolded me and took me to a bunker and I got beat up again. Then they took me to a railroad station, sat me on a bunker, and threw stones at me for about an hour.

We got into a 1937 Ford V-8. Two soldiers sat in front and I got into the back seat with a guard on either side of me. The car wouldn't start. I said, "I think you're out of gas," and I got a beating out of that. I learned to keep my mouth shut.

We went into this building—I had to have a soldier on each side of me to hold me up, I was so bruised up and I had all these broken bones and I'd lost a lot of blood—and a guy in front of me asked my name and I told them "William Price," and he asked my rank and I told him

"sergeant," and he must have not liked that and he hit me twice. I came to and they took me to Nagoya Castle, and I was in solitary for six days. On the seventh day, a nice Japanese guy came in and sat on the floor. He was a nice guy 'cause he didn't beat me. He said I was going to Tokyo. I said, "What for?" He said, "To be executed."

We took a train to Tokyo, to Camp Omori. It was on a sandbar two blocks wide and a block long, but the camp was half that size. B-29 prisoners weren't very well liked. In Germany, one percent of prisoners died. In the Pacific, 40 percent died as POWs. But of captured B-29 crews, only five percent got back alive.

The camp consisted of 517 POWs, and the majority were regular prisoners. They had a group of special prisoners in one building who got half rations. We were special, special prisoners: We got quarter rations. I went four months, 10 days without a bath, shave, or haircut. All of that was in solitary—that was the rough part. Beatings I could take.

I weighed 104 pounds when I got out of the cell and I weighed 150 normally. We got out August 15 and got put in with the rest of the prisoners. We knew something was going on. We heard rumors that the war was over. A few days later the [U.S.] Navy had carriers off the coast of Japan, and the fighter pilots would take up collections of cigarettes and candy bars and drop those on the camp. Later B-29s would come over and drop platforms with parachutes—food, clothing, and stuff like that. I got my first shave and haircut. On August 29 we were liberated. August 29 was another special day—the Japanese had orders to execute all prisoners on August 29.

Our field was northeast of Berlin, near Garz, a little village about five kilometers west from the river Oder. Twenty-seven April [1945]. Russian aircraft were attacking the field, so three or four aircraft took off without any command and just tried to defend our airport. Everywhere you looked there were Russians but no formations; they were loose. Visibility was poor, clouds were all over. I noticed an aircraft coming head on, and I realized it was a Russian Yak 9. They were an excellent aircraft, like a Spitfire, and much lighter than the 190. The 190 had also excellent maneuverability, but the Yak could turn tighter because of the light weight.

At the same time we opened fire at a distance of maybe a mile or two miles, and of course at our speed it was a matter of seconds only. We wanted to bypass each other, but we brushed each other and our two craft disintegrated. Half a minute later I was standing on the ground with my parachute, looking up—it was so fast my brain couldn't fathom what happened. Debris [from both airplanes] was still raining down. I was injured; I lost my four front teeth bailing out. I fell into the tail section of my aircraft and injured my left knee—I tore a ligament.

I was just about half a mile from the fighting front. It was a very dangerous area. One minute later the Russians came from all sides. It was vicious; they tried to rip me from my flightsuit. I'm sure they would have killed me on the spot if [I didn't have] protection from a Russian officer, and I knew why he protected me, because for the next two days I was interrogated 10 times, every time by a different officer. Of course, the interrogation was

understandable because they wanted to know where the defense of Berlin was. I didn't get a bite to eat and not a drink of water.

On the third day I was put in a horse-drawn wagon with two wounded [German] infantrymen and a guard and one driver. We must have lost our way because they unloaded us in a little meadow near a village. Just close by was a wooded area like a Christmas tree farm. We expected to be shot. The guard sitting with us was very tired and didn't pay any attention to us; he thought we cannot run away. I had the impression he was falling asleep and I backed away. I ran away—probably 100, 200 feet. It was a run for life or death. Lucky enough they did not search for me.

All over I heard the engines of the tanks and the Russian soldiers preparing for the Battle of Berlin. I knew of the railroad line to Berlin, and I [oriented myself] from the North Star so that I go south. I had to go through [an area along the railroad] about 400 kilometers from the Russian-occupied frontline [to get home to Austria].

When the war was over on the 8th of May, I was just east of Berlin. In the middle of the night there was a big, big bang—every cannon was fired. It was like World War III. After about a week I got away from the railroad track. I found a bicycle and the pain on my leg was horrendous because I had to pedal. On the way I found some rhubarb and some sugar molasses. I found maybe dirty water. From Leipzig to Munich I helped myself by hanging on with my bicycle on the American convoy trucks and I made that distance in about two days. I could not pedal anymore. The Americans were amused that this dirty man was hanging on and they let me.

I got through all the control points. When we came to Munich I lost my bicycle in the French Zone. The [French] soldiers took it from me. It was almost a fight. The soldiers put a pistol on my chest. I made it home on 18 May. It was my birthday. I was 21. I [had] lost 30 pounds.

was shot down by a MiG-15 in February 1953. We were on air surveillance, flying high CAP [combat air patrol] for fighter-bombers. All the -86s used to patrol up there to make sure nothing was going to shoot down our fighter-bombers. I parachuted into a village and the Korean Home Guard captured me and took care of my wounds. I got shrapnel in my back and left shoulder and a piece in my left wrist, and when I landed in a frozen rice paddy it busted my knees open. It was about 30 degrees below zero.

They turned me over to the Chinese, who had me blindfolded. The Chinese ate a lot of garlic so I could smell it on their faces when they came close to look at me. They hit me and kicked me, and they took me up to an air base in Manchuria, and there I met the Chinese pilot who said he'd shot me down. He shook my hand and thanked me. [The Chinese] trucked me blindfolded to an interrogation center and interrogated me eight, 10, 12, 15 hours a day for the first 30 days or so. They sentenced me to 100 years in solitary.

They were transferring me a week at a time or so to different parts of North Korea and had me isolated. Every so often I'd get interrogated. I faced three or more firing squads, and I dug my own grave about three times. I just took my time—it kept me away from interrogation. They pointed their rifles at me and they just went click, click, click—there were no bullets in them.

After they sentenced me, they put me in a box long enough to stretch my legs out. I had to lie down in it—there wasn't much room. I was in there for a week with no food or water, and then they'd take me out again to interrogate me and I wouldn't submit so they put me in there again. One guard seemed sympathetic. He sneaked me water every so often.

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The war was over in July. They didn't tell me until August. They put me in a truck and drove me to a train station and put me in [a train for] Panmunjom. The last day they released prisoners was August 6th. I got out on August 5th.

My daughter-in-law got on Google.com [in 2002] and happened to type my name in. It came up with a list of Russian aces, with their stories on how many people they'd knocked down. At the end of this thing there was this one Russian ace that claimed I was his victim and he explained exactly how it happened in excruciating detail. It wasn't that Chinese. That was a surprise to me.

I was strafing a radar station in southern France—Toulon. Right across the top of the target a damn anti-aircraft shell—20 or 30 millimeters—came right up through the floor and out through the top of the canopy. If it hadn't come up in front of the stick, the family jewels would have been in jeopardy.

I pulled up off the deck at 400 miles per hour maximum and reached an altitude of 800 feet. I pulled a red knob on the panel and the canopy goes off. I hit the trim tab with my left hand and the nose went down. I hit the seatbelt buckle and all the straps came loose and I went flying out of the cockpit. I remember the tail going by—I pulled the D-ring—and going down through the trees. I got bruises and contusions. I hit the ground and rolled over. I landed right in the middle of the guys who shot me down. The damn Germans said, "Ach so," I guess to mean "Look at this." I was captured immediately. August 12, 1944. Number one and three in the flight got through. They didn't see me get out and told [the unit] that I was killed in action.

I went through the interrogation process in Frankfurt, then to Stalag Luft 3. They treated us as officers and gentlemen per the Geneva Convention. In the interrogation they knew more about me than I knew about myself. They had my January '44 Tuskegee Army Airfield graduation picture. The German said, "Lieutenant, is that you?"

I was the fourth black guy in the camp. Three other guys came out of my group, the Tuskegee Airmen. We were like specks of pepper in buttermilk. Many of the prisoners in camp had been there two, three years. They didn't know blacks were trained to fly. Some of the guys thought I might be a South African. There was still military discipline in the camp. There might have been prejudice, but they never expressed it. We were all in the same bucket.

In the camp, the crew of a B-17 that got shot down arrived, and the word spread that the Red Tails [the Tuskegee Airmen painted the tails of their P-51s red] never lost a bomber while we were in Italy. After that my esteem went up a thousand percent. There was still occasional segregation in U.S. forces on the ground in Italy, but no segregation in the camp. We spread out in different rooms in the barracks, never together. In the end 32 blacks had been captured.

When the Russians started pushing through in January '45, the Germans put us on a road in 20-degree-below weather and we walked 80 kilometers, then they put us in forty-and-eights

[railroad freight cars that could hold 40 men or eight horses] and took us to Stalag 7A near Munich, and Patton's army liberated us on April 29, '45.

I graduated flight school in February 1970, got into Vietnam April 1, 1970, and got shot down May 2, 1970, the day after the U.S. invaded Cambodia. As a new guy in-country, they put me with an experienced pilot who'd fly in the left seat. Near the end of that day, at around 1600 hours, we took on a load of parts, mail, and four passengers.

We were supposed to fly to a fire support base by the name of Bruiser, right over the Cambodian border. After we got in the air 20 to 25 minutes, a monsoon came in. We had to plunge into the squall. Initially we heard something hit the aircraft. I looked down to my right front and saw what appeared to be red basketballs. It turned out to be radar-controlled .51-caliber fire.

I had been flying the aircraft, but the pilot, Mike Varnado, grabbed the controls immediately, and he's trying to make S-turns to break the lock from the radar-controlled gun. We lost the hydraulics, and the tracers caught the hydraulic fluid on fire. The back is on fire. The guys, I see them choking and pushing stuff out the doors. I hear "Oh shit." All this hydraulic liquid filled up the chin bubble on the pilot's side, and within a couple of seconds fire is engulfing the whole [port] side. I take the controls while he tries to get away from the fire and puts out "mayday" calls.

As we broke out of the squall, I see a rice paddy 200 or 300 feet below me. I put it into a tight 360-degree turn and brought it down in the center of this paddy. Six people in back of the aircraft are not waiting to get the hell out. The aircraft commander got out of the left door, but mine was jammed. The crew chief, Fred Crowson, helped me crawl out through a window. I looked off to the right and I saw black pajamas [Viet Cong] running toward us. Someone yelled, "Here they come." I pulled out my trusty .38 revolver.

I kept firing at bad guys as I ran toward a dike. I dove over it and within a few seconds somebody came and landed a foot from me: Captain Robert Young [one of the passengers]. Six or seven bad guys were in front of us. I fired, reloaded, and the third time I reloaded, two bad guys with AK-47s took a running jump over the dike and one stuck his barrel in my face, one pointed at Bob's face. A third guy said, "Surrender or die." I dropped that .38 damn quick.

They took us just past the tree line and took our boots off and pulled the laces out and tied us up with the laces. They used our socks as blindfolds. Within a couple of hours they walked us into a POW camp. There turned out to be about a dozen Americans in there. Later that night they brought in Varnado. Mike had been shot in the chest and above the knee cap, and it looked like it had shattered his knee. A week or two later they took Mike away because he had been wounded. We only saw him once again in July and he looked absolutely terrible. Bob Young, he survived for two and a half years. He was a six-foot-tall, 190-pound ranger, a brilliant guy, but he got so sick he dropped down to 75 or 80 pounds. On a Sunday, it was drizzling, and [a guard] unchained me and another guy to pick up the dinner bowls. Somebody yelled, "Go check on Bob." I kneeled down and said to him, "We got to get a little food in you."

The poor son of a bitch, he died in my arms. Of the last four guys in the helicopter, it turned out that one of them hid in the jungle and made it back to friendly territory in three or four days. The other three were listed as missing in action and have since been declared killed in action.

It was an RB-29, a recce [reconnaissance] version of the B-29, on a nighttime bomb-damage assessment of a bridge strike. The search lights were on us for less than a minute, then we were hit by [MiG-15s].

I don't know if the flames were coming from the engines or the tanks, but there was burning, and burning furiously. I told the crew to bail out. I couldn't stand the fire any longer and I dove out the front hatch and hit my head on the escape hatch and knocked myself out.

When I came to, I was falling. I noticed I could hear a flapping when I put my hand on the risers, and I realized the noise was coming from the skin from my arms and face. I landed in a rice paddy up to my crotch. It took me 20 minutes to work my way out of it. I was exhausted and in shock, of course. I was not aware of any pain at that time. It was 30 minutes after midnight on the fourth of July [1952]. That bit of information flashed through my brain: "Holy cow, it's the fourth of July and I may lose my independence."

I concealed myself in some brush and I passed out or went to sleep. It was after daylight. The next thing that entered my mind was that I had a terrible thirst, because my wounds were weeping liquid so fast. I was well aware of the pain by that time. I went searching for water, and when I got up I heard some North Korean soldiers searching the area. So one of them walked within 10 feet of me and didn't see me.

After they had looked around the area I could hear a truck start and drive away. I started down the hill and in a field I noticed an old woman and young woman. My appearance frightened the old woman and the young woman rushed over to me, and I made some motions that I needed water. She gave me water out of a bowl and took me into a house where there was a cistern and gave me all the water I could drink. As I was finishing that an old man showed up. He was less than enchanted I was there; all he wanted me to do was get out quick, and I did.

I got on a trail that I thought might take me to another house, but I bumped into an old, old woman. My approach startled her badly. I could tell when she looked at my face and by the way she covered up her mouth. I motioned for water, then she motioned for me to follow her. She took me down the hill, which was practically in a village. She pointed to a building. I passed through the door and saw a guy in a white coat. He looked at me and motioned to me to sit in a chair. He got a mortar and pestle and he threw a lump of white material in and put some water in it and began to mix it up. He came over to me with a thing that looked like a small spatula and began to put that on me.



Then I felt a cold metal pressed in the back of my neck. The old lady had run down and reported my presence. A soldier came there and pointed his AK-47 at me and that was the end of my freedom for the next 14 months.